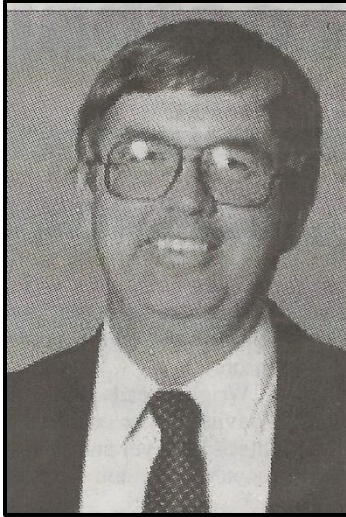


# The stuff of legends



**Marty O'Brien: A humble figure who was bigger than life to Ephrata**

**BY STEVEN SMITH**  
**of the Journal**

EPHRATA – In 2006, as Dave Johnson was heading into retirement, Marty O'Brien had a great idea – name the Ephrata High baseball field after his longtime friend, business partner and fellow coach.

The plan was in place before the school board pulled a fast one on O'Brien, and as the deception became clear, so did the true image of a man well-known for his boisterous personality.

Marty O'Brien showed his humble side that day as the name Johnson-O'Brien Stadium was hung on the field.

That was 13 years ago and O'Brien's wife, Judy, recalled the moment as well. But that was the true nature of the late Marty O'Brien, who passed away in 2008, and she said she's sure that's how he would have approached the next honor he will receive the same way.

O'Brien, the longtime baseball and boys basketball coach at EHS, will be among the first 13 inductees into the Ephrata High athletic Hall of Fame. Both he and Johnson will be enshrined in a ceremony on Sept. 28 at the St. Rose of Lima Catholic School.

In an interview following the field rededication, O'Brien said that he wanted to rename the facility for Johnson because he felt his friend had been the architect of the highly successful Ephrata baseball program. He downplayed his own accomplishments with Johnson, but those feats were huge – together, the men won more than 1,000 varsity and JV baseball games and dozens of titles, including eight state championships.

And on his own, O'Brien helped to reshape the boys basketball team, leading it to the school's first-ever state title in the sport in 1993. In 20 years as the head hoop mentor, O'Brien posted a record of 340-179 with six league titles with one district championship and six state trophies.

O'Brien has garnered many honors because of his coaching successes. In addition to the baseball park, the main gymnasium at the school carries his name (Marty O'Brien Court), and he is a member of both the state baseball and basketball coaches halls of fame.

All of that, said Judy O'Brien, makes her husband worthy of being in Ephrata's hall.

"When they renamed the field, Marty went to the district and wanted it for Dave. They came here at the same time, they built the field together, but he always felt it should have been about Dave," she said. "It was never about him. As talkative as he was, he was never arrogant.

"He is deserving of this and the kids who played for him would believe it. He would be proud of the honor and he'd accept it but he'd be humble about it," she added.

It was while they were coaching together that Johnson and O'Brien started the Total Baseball Instruction (TBI) camps, which they ran for more than 30 years – it finally closed down after the summer of 2008 after O'Brien passed away from a fatal heart attack.

Johnson said he still thinks about his friend and partner "quite a bit. I think about him often, what he might say about how things are today from when we were coaching."

"Marty was a great motivator – when he stopped coaching, it was tough. I think about how different our strengths were, how we complimented each other so well," Johnson said. "So much of our success was because Marty mentally prepared our kids. By the time he passed away, we were wrapping up TBI but we were ready to do that.

## The high school coaching fraternity is a small one.

"Now I go down to the ballfield and our names are up there – one of the reasons I wanted to take care of the park was to honor him. We had the dream of having a nice baseball field and other people got on board," he continued. "I want it to be a good field, I have time to do it and I love doing it. It's a big reminder of why we're what we are and how much Marty meant to all of it."

O'Brien was a passionate story teller who loved to share his memories – it was once said that he loved an audience and his audiences loved him. But the coach inside of O'Brien loved to impart his wisdom to young mentors and one that now runs the program said the time he got with O'Brien was invaluable.

"He was so supportive and someone I could talk to about hoops and coaching forever. I take great admiration for what he did for the tradition of Ephrata basketball," said current Tiger chief Brandon Evenson. "A lot of the offense we run is out of his style and sets. He was always ahead of his time in thinking and things he wanted to do. He was a true Tiger through and through."

Johnson said O'Brien would have considered the selection to the Hall a great honor but he wouldn't have shown it outwardly.

"I think he would enjoy it but he'd never tell people how great he was – that wasn't Marty. When they inducted him into the (basketball) Hall of Fame, he got up and thanked a lot of people for his success," Johnson said. "He had a lot of confidence but he was also very humble when it came to himself."

"His dedication to Ephrata was tremendous. He would bleed orange-and-black," Judy O'Brien said. "Ephrata was part of his heart and spirit. He loved teaching at the junior high and coaching at the high school. He couldn't think of anything else."



Monday night's Washington Interscholastic Basketball Coaches Association Hall of Fame induction banquet at the Red Lion Inn at the Park proved the point.

The connections of the four honored coaches — the late Jack Cleveland, Denny Humphrey, Terry Irwin and Marty O'Brien — run deep, with Eastern Washington at their nexus.

O'Brien, Humphrey and Irwin grew up here. O'Brien, Humphrey and Cleveland earned degrees from Eastern Washington, a state college when O'Brien and Humphrey were classmates. All four spent their entire head coaching careers on the east side of the Cascades.

And all exhibited values common to the Inland Northwest.

"I guarantee you, there's not a coach in the world who has done anything by themselves," said O'Brien, who graduated from North Central High and spent his entire coaching career at Ephrata High. "Everything we do in the whole world; it is always other people who help us."

This isn't the first state hall of fame into which O'Brien has been inducted. In 1994, he was honored by the Washington State Baseball Coaches Association for his 24 years as an assistant at Ephrata. At the time, he was only the second assistant coach to earn the hall of fame honor.

O'Brien was 340-178 in 20 years as the Tigers head boys basketball coach, winning the school's only state title in 1993. That team finished 26-1, including a 67-58 win over Port Townsend in the 1A title game. He took Ephrata to the state tournament eight times, including four consecutive years in the mid-1980s.

### ***Dion Martin "Marty" O'Brien of Ephrata***

Marty O'Brien passed away unexpectedly in his sleep July 15, 2007 at the age of 63. Marty, the last of six children, was born on May 27, 1944, to Joseph Martin and Lucy (Willoughby) O'Brien in Spokane.

He attended North Central High School, where he excelled on both the basketball court and the baseball field and accomplished just enough to get by in the classroom.

He went on to play baseball at Columbia Basin Community College and Eastern Washington College, where he earned all-conference honors at shortstop his senior year. On December 28, 1963, he married Judy Ann Kemp, his high school sweetheart and wife of 43 years. Marty served in the Washington Air National Guard at Geiger Field from 1967-1975. Upon graduating from college in 1967, Marty worked as a youth director at Fairchild Air Force Base two years before returned to EWC to earn his education degree. He worked for the Burlington Northern Railroad a short time before taking a teaching position in Ephrata Schools in August 1970.

In his first year at Ephrata his additional responsibilities were junior high school wrestling coach and assistant high school baseball coach. He envisioned the Ephrata opportunity as being a stepping stone to bigger and better things, but quickly fell in love with the community and students and the challenge to make Ephrata a special place in which to live and grow up.

For 30 years he was an assistant baseball coach to close friend Dave Johnson. Together they built a baseball program and field complex that the community could be proud of and was second to none statewide. During the summers, Marty and Dave were partners in the TBI Baseball Camp, instructing boys from around the Northwest for over 30 years. After two years of coaching junior high basketball Marty became the assistant high school basketball coach for seven years. In 1980 he became the head basketball coach at Ephrata and brought the

school a stretch of unprecedented success over the next 21 years with the pinnacle being the 1993 Washington State Championship. His dedication and intense desire to be successful led to teams that gave their all on the field and court and represented the school in a way that earned respect from both the community and opponents.

His coaching achievements were recognized when he was inducted into the Washington State Baseball Hall of Fame in 1994 and the Washington State Basketball Hall of Fame in 2004. He retired from education in 2002. In December 2003 Marty went to work for Canfield & Associates (later Brown & Brown) as a risk management workshop presenter. Marty enjoyed his partial retirement traveling with his wife, spending time with friends and family (especially his grandchildren), talking about wanting to play more golf, and closely following Notre Dame football.

Marty was survived by his wife Judy, sons Shawn and his wife Laura Lea, Kelly and Devin; three grandchildren, Darby, Dylan and Derek.

A memorial service was held at the Ephrata High School gymnasium on August 4, 2007 with Senior Pastor Brian T. Anderson, a former player and friend, presiding. An Irish Wake – Celebration of Life – was held at St. Rose of Lima School. In lieu of flowers, a donation may be made to the Columbia Basin Foundation for the **Marty O'Brien Scholarship Fund** at 234 First Avenue Northwest, Ephrata, WA 98823.

For more information about the Marty O'Brien Scholarship Fund view: [Youtube.com/Marty O'Brien's Story](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O'Brien's+Story) 1-17-2003

[Additional articles](#) regarding O'Brien in "Tigerville News" newsletter which was developed in preparation for the Ephrata High School 100-year reunion in 2014.

View: [Ephrata TigersAlumni.com](http://EphrataTigersAlumni.com)

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